Epigraphy NT

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Epigram

An epigram is a malleable literary term of no certain definition; it is used to describe terse or witty aphorisms, usually, but not necessarily, in verse. In Scripture the term is often assigned to biblical passages translated into Latin, thence to modern languages which make use of epigrammatic forms. The epigram is related to the proverb or aphorism, and is most frequently based upon grammatical and thematic parallelism. But definitions are as elastic as they are inadequate.

In the epigram we have a rhetorical form that had already established itself as a useful poetical figure in classical literature to harmonize with and finally absorb a poetic form which is ubiquitous in the HB/OT. According to one school of thought, the epigram is simply a short, polished, pithy saying, usually in verse, often with a satiric twist in the second of two parallel clauses. But very often the terms "proverb" and "epigram" are used interchangeably, although proverbs may consist of as little as a single simple phrase: for example, "All flesh is grass" (Isa 40:6). The book of Proverbs begins with an attempt to define the very concept of a "proverb":

> A wise man will hear, and will increase learning; / and a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels:
> to understand a proverb, and the interpretation; / the words of the wise, and their dark sayings
> The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge (Prov 1:5–7).

According to Publius Syrus, Aristotle stated in a work now lost a remarkably similar definition: "A proverb is the remnant of the ancient philosophy preserved amidst very many destructions on account of its brevity and fitness for use" (Christy).

The aura of ancient authority imparted by the form has been appropriated by literary artists through the ages from Chaucer's "The lyf so short, the crafte so long to learne" (Chaucer: 385) to Shakespeare's "I wasted time, now doth time waste me" (*Richard II* 5.14). The native receptiveness of English to the rhythms of the heroic couplet is yet another factor in the longevity and ubiquity of the form. This linguistic feature lends an air of biblical gravitas to non-scriptural lines. See, for example, William Blake, *The Proverbs of Hell*; e.g., number 5, "the cut worm forgives the plow" (Blake: 7). Among the greatest literary epigrammatists in stature and influence is Benjamin Franklin, particularly in his *Poor Richard's Almanack*, a compendium of distinctively American adages, such as the familiar, "early to bed, early to rise, makes a man, healthy, wealthy, and wise" (Franklin: n.p.); Ben Jonson, who put the epigram to mostly satirical uses; and Alexander Pope, whose winning couplet-proverbs have endeared him to generations of school children: "A little learning is a dangerous thing. Drink deep! Or taste not the Pierian spring" (Pope: 15).

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Epigraphy

I. Hebrew Bible/Old Testament

The term "epigraphy" derives from two Gk. lexemes, namely, the preposition ἐπί meaning "upon" and the noun γραφή, "writing." In ANE and Mediterranean studies, this term is normally used to refer to the the discipline of deciphering, reading, and analysis of texts that have been discovered during excavations.

There are a number of divisions within the field of epigraphy, divided primarily according to the language of the text. Thus, the term "Northwest Semitic epigraphy" focuses on texts in Northwest Semitic languages such as Ugaritic, Phoenician, Hebrew, Aramaic, Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, and Philistine (Cross; Rollston). The term "Egyptian epigraphy" refers to the deciphering, reading, and analysis of ancient Egyptian texts (in Hieroglyphic, Hieratic, Demotic, and Coptic). "Sumerian epigraphy" and "Akkadian epigraphy" refer to the study of epigraphic materials in Sumerian and Akkadian, respectively (Labat), "Hittite epigraphy" to excavated ancient texts preserved in Hittite, and "Greco-Roman epigraphy" to ancient texts preserved in Greek and Latin (Metzger).

Texts written in the various languages are often subdivided according to the media and means of writing. For example, Akkadian texts were inscribed on clay tablets with a stylus (when the clay was still wet) and then sun dried or kiln dried. Sometimes Mesopotamian monumental texts would be chiseled into prepared stone. Cylinder seals (e.g., made from stone or clay) are also a very common medium for inscriptions in Mesopotamia. Within the field of Northwest Semitic epigraphy, ostraca (i.e., broken pieces of pottery that have ink writing on them, made using a reed pen) are very

commonly preserved, as are stamp seals, bullae (i.e., the small lumps of clay impressed with a stamp seal), vellum (tanned animal skin), and papyri. Jars could be impressed with a seal; these are simply referred to as "jar impressions." Ancient scribes would also etch or chisel an inscription into a potsherd or a jar. A limited number of monumental inscriptions in Northwest Semitic languages have been found (e.g., the Mesha Stele, the Tel Dan Stele; the Ekron Stele). Within Egypt, monumental inscriptions, inscriptions in tombs, ostraca, and papyri are all very common. Greek and Lat. texts are also often preserved on papyri, and, of course, monumental inscriptions in Greek and Latin are very common as well. In sum, various types of media were used in antiquity and in various regions for the writing of ancient texts, and all such texts are the subject of epigraphic work. Numerous genres are, of course, present in the epigraphic record: economic dockets, administrative texts, purchase and sale contracts, marriages, divorces, adoptions, royal annals, treaties, myths, and legends.

Various processes and tools are part and parcel of the practice of epigraphy.

The most important component of epigraphic analysis is the text itself. Normally, an epigraphist will personally inspect (i.e., "collate") the text, often using things such as a microscope, or a magnifying glass. Photographs of the text are also of paramount importance. Often during the process of collating and analyzing a text, an epigrapher will produce a "hand-copy" of the text, transcribing the signs or letters that he or she believes to be present. This can be done either with pencil and paper, or digitally with the use of a software program such as Photoshop. Script charts (i.e., of the various signs or letters used to write a language) and lexica are fundamental tools for the practice of epigraphy, as are grammars of the various languages and concordances of known corpora. The usual end product of epigraphic analyses is a transliteration and translation, replete with philological, syntactic, paleographic, historical, and sociological information.

Epigraphic method should govern the entire process of epigraphic analysis. Among the most important epigraphic methodologies to be noted are the following:

(1) Determining the reading of the text, that is, determining precisely which signs or letters are present is the most basic and most important component of epigraphic analysis.

(2) After making determinations regarding the readings, the epigraphist must then attempt to determine factors such as the divisions into words (not always an easy task), the parts of speech, and the lexemes present. Such determinations are not always simple. Often context will be useful in assisting the modern epigraphist, but the context is not always decisive.

(3) Faded and abraded letters are common. Sometimes they can be restored with some measure of confidence, but sometimes not at all. Sometimes a single sign will be faded or abraded and a plausible reading can be posited on the basis of the traces (of the faded or abraded letter) and the surrounding letters. In such cases, lexical data can be used to assist in determining the probable reading for the faded or abraded letter. Nevertheless, even in such cases, certitude is often elusive, as there are frequently multiple viable lexical options.

(4) Restorations of multiple letters, entire words, or even phrases are normally precarious ventures. To be sure, there are a number of tools in the epigraphist's "toolbox" that can be of some use in this situation. For example, a line of a text that contains repetitious language can sometimes be restored with some certitude. Moreover, a formulaic text (e.g., a legal text, such as a contract) can sometimes be restored, based on its use of traditional formulaic words and phrases. A critical aspect of epigraphic reconstruction is measuring the lacuna(e) and determining the number of missing letters.

(5) Furthermore, it should always be remembered that modern translations of ancient texts are subject to the same caveats and provisos of any translated text. That is, translations are approximations.

Paleography is a subfield within the field of epigraphy. The premise of the field of paleography (and all the typological sciences) is that artifacts develop through time and that this development can be discerned in an empirical fashion, described, and used as the basis for typologies. New finds serve to augment, refine, and revise typologies (e.g., for a script series or pottery sequence).

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II. New Testament

For analysis of that environment in which the NT texts emerged, epigraphic materials prove indispensable: they provide keen insight into not only governmental administration and economic activity, but also – and most importantly – various dimensions of everyday life that ancient writers otherwise ignore largely if not completely. As opposed to the literature transmitted to us over the ages, inscriptions give voice to lower, non-elite social strata. These "speaking stones" bring to life and into view the ancients' everyday world, echoing experiences from across all social divisions, including the first Christians as well.

Within the NT itself, only a single passage speaks of an inscription: John 19:19–20. This text mentions the sign written in three languages and affixed to Jesus' cross – an epigraph designated by the loanword τίτλος. Nevertheless, the number of inscriptions that aid in historical placement and interpretation of the NT writings are countless (cf. Boffo's compilation). Such epigraphic materials are vital for a) locating particular biblical figures historically or socially, b) illuminating the Roman administrative and military presence within the NT texts' regions of composition (cf. Eck), c) garnering inferences concerning the local color of places that saw the establishment of the first Christian congregations, d) reflecting the religious conceptions and practices of Jews and Gentiles and thus the people who would encounter the new Christian message, and d) granting insight into recreational activities of the ancients and therefore their social and religious experiences and communal expectations.

The following examples should demonstrate the benefits that epigraphic study can afford NT scholarship, particularly when such investigations center on questions of chronology, religion, and society.

1. Chronology. The personal testimonials of Paul provide no internal information that can secure dates for either the apostle's life or his individual letters. Without the so-called Gallio Inscription, a chronology of Paul's life would remain impossible (Plassart: 27-32 [no. 286]). Documented epigraphically at Delphi, a letter from Claudius helps date the tenure of Gallio – the Roman proconsul of Achaia (ἀνθύπατος τῆς Ἀχαΐας) who judged Paul in Corinth, according to Acts 18:12 – to the year 51/52 CE. From this juncture, the apostle's 18-month stay in Corinth (Acts 18:11) would have then taken place, at the earliest, between autumn of 49 and summer of 51 or, at the latest, between spring of 52 and winter of 53/54 (cf. Deissmann 1957: 239–56; Murphy-O'Connor).

2. Prosopography. On occasion, academic inquiries seek to identify figures named in NT texts with persons mentioned in epigraphic materials. Additional information can then facilitate their social classification. For example, one inscription from Corinth refers to a certain *aedilis* Erastus (AÉ 1930:118) who might be identical with Erastus of Rom 16:23 (Ἔραστος ὁ οἰκονόμος τῆς πόλεως). If so, the Corinthian congregation would have included a member of high rank, one who had acquired the second-highest of governmental offices (cf. Theißen: 236–45).

3. Military and Administration. The Gospels grant Pontius Pilate – the Roman proconsul of Judea in the years 26–25 CE and thus during the time of Jesus' crucifixion – the unspecific Gk. title ἡγεμών. Based on the correlations of his time, Tacitus names the Roman official *procurator* (*Ann.* 15, 44, 3). The correct designation for Pontius Pilate as *praefectus Iudaeae*, by contrast, comes from a building inscription in *Caesarea maritima* (AE 1981: 850; cf. Weber; Labbe; Alföldy).

4. *Lokalkolorit*. Inscriptional and archaeological finds offer a particularly keen view into the specific character of individual cities. The social and religious composition of the population, the organization of public administration, and the dynamics of trade relationships all indicate how the message of early missionaries might have been understood and how conflicts with inhabitants and authorities could have materialized (cf. for Philippi, Pilhofer 1995; 2009; for Thessalonica, vom Brocke; for Ephesus, Lampe).

5. Religion. Epigraphic materials can supply substantial evidence for individual and communal beliefs and expectations. For perspective into the ancients' conceptions of life after death, epitaphs can prove quite useful (cf. Peres). Inscriptions also preserve fixed formulae associated with any number of other religions, as demonstrated by the Isis aretalogies found on temples dedicated to the deity, which bear a certain relationship to the ἐγώ εἰμι statements within the Gospel of John (cf. Merkelbach).

6. Social Reality. Additional social dimensions that conditioned the ancients' views on life and community emerge only through the reading of epigraphic materials. For instance, through inscriptions alone do antique clubs and associations come into view – organizations that influenced the religious and social activities of many ancients and represented strong, established competitors for the nascent Christian communities (cf. Ebel; Kloppenborg/Ascough).

7. Implicit Messages. Knowledge of epigraphic materials further elucidates the semantic fields of specific terms also employed in the NT and therefore illuminates additional subtexts. As but one example, the so-called Priene Inscription (*OGIS* II:458) – an edict from the proconsul of the province Asia, dated to 9 BCE – orders that the new year begin with the birthday of Augustus, September 23. Here within the imperial cult, the birth of a savior appears alongside the locution εὐαγγέλια – a point particularly poignant for NT scholarship, as the rivalry of imperial cult and Christian belief increased with the common claim on the term εὐαγγέλιον (cf. Ettl).

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See also →Paleography

Epilepsy

I. Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible/ Old Testament

Although antiquity lacked a technical medical term for epilepsy (cf. below, "II. New Testament"), the Hippocratic text *On the Sacred Disease*, dating from as early as the 5th century BCE, was formerly considered the earliest extant treatise on epilepsy. However, that Gk. text was long preceded by the Babylonian treatise designated *miqtu*, the Akk. term for "the falling disease." The latter text, now thought to be the earliest known account of epilepsy, is found mainly on tablet 25 (or 26) of the 40 cuneiform tablets that comprise the Babylonian medical diagnostic collection called *Sakikkū* or "All diseases," whose two unearthed versions are putative copies of an original version dating between 1067 and 1046 BCE (Kinnier Wilson/Reynolds: 185–86; see also Daras et al.; York).

Whether persuasively or not, it has been suggested, most notably by Julius Preuss (1861–1913) and Fred Rosner, that epileptic phenomena or allusions to them are detectible in certain passages of the HB/OT. Rosner (1977: 6) submits that Balaam's self-description as "one who … sees the vision of the Almighty, who falls down, but with eyes uncovered" (Num 24:4), alludes to epilepsy, as the scriptural expression "falling down" (*nōfēl*) likely connotes an epileptic seizure (2000: 115). Accordingly, Balaam's falling, open-eyed (Num 22:31; cf. 24:16b), and three incidents involving Saul (his prophetic raving at 1 Sam 18:10, his prophetic frenzy, involving falling down naked at 19:24, and his falling to the ground at 28:20) have been viewed as symptomatic of epilepsy (Preuss 1911: 341-42; 1978: 299; Pirkner: 455, 463–64; Daras et al.: 233). Yet such an assessment, based as it is on modern medical conjecture, is impossible to verify. The same is true of two other scholars' conjectures that, at 1 Sam 19:24, the use of the verb *hitnabbē'* (in most English translations: "to prophesy"; but NAB: "to remain in the prophetic state"; NRSV: "to fall into a frenzy") "refers to [Saul's] being in a trance, which appears to confirm the diagnosis of his being epileptic" (Nissan/Shemesh: 151).

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II. New Testament

As the ancient world did not have one specific medical term to denote epilepsy, various different names were in use. Due to its seriousness, epilepsy was often referred to as "the great disease," yet it was mainly known as "the sacred disease," i.e., the illness sent from God (or the gods) as a form of punishment. People afflicted with epilepsy were called "epileptic" (from Gk. ἐπιλαμβάνειν, "to take hold